



**TESTIMONY REGARDING THE OFFICE OF THE HEALTH CARE ADVOCATE
Governor's Implementer Bill Sections 44-51**

March 8, 2011

INTRODUCTION

The Center for Medicare Advocacy, Inc. (The Center) is a private, non-profit organization headquartered in Mansfield, Connecticut with offices in Washington, DC and throughout the nation. The Center provides education and legal assistance to advance fair access to Medicare and health care. We represent Medicare beneficiaries throughout the state, respond to approximately 6,500 calls and emails annually, and host two websites. The Center also provides written and electronic materials, education, and expert support for Connecticut's CHOICES health insurance, counseling and assistance program, and provides a wide array of other services for Medicare beneficiaries throughout Connecticut and the United States.

THE GOVERNOR'S PROPOSAL TO MERGE THE OFFICE OF HEALTHCARE ADVOCATE (OHA) WITH THE DEPARTMENT OF CONSUMER PROTECTION, TO ELIMINATE THE INDEPENDENT APPOINTMENT OF THE HEALTHCARE ADVOCATE, AND TO REDUCE THE OHA STAFF WILL CREATE HARM AND WILL NOT SAVE THE STATE MONEY

The Center for Medicare Advocacy has extensive experience working with the Office of the Healthcare Advocate on behalf of people who have been denied fair access to health care coverage and necessary health care. We have worked effectively together on many occasions to assist individuals navigate complex private and public health coverage issues and to work for systemic change to enhance fair access to coverage.

Our offices work together and refer individuals to each other. When the issues facing someone involve problems with private health insurance coverage, no one is better able to help than the OHA. They are adept at solving private health insurance impasses that no other entity in Connecticut can handle.

In addition, the Center for Medicare Advocacy has worked with OHA on broader problems that involve public and private insurance. These activities have included:

- Analyzing and explaining changes to Medicare, Medicaid and health care reform and the interplay between these private and public insurance options;
- Enhancing access to the Medicare Savings Programs for Connecticut's lower income population, thereby reducing the need for and costs of the ConnPACE program;
- Limiting unfair health insurance premium increases.

In addition, the OHA has been a leader in developing collaborative efforts across interest groups, from health care providers to advocates and beneficiaries themselves. The OHA leadership and staff have understood the myriad complex issues touching all these constituencies and have worked to come to solutions that all parties can accept. This has been recently demonstrated with regard to gaining fair insurance coverage for mental health services.

Under the leadership of Kevin Lembo and Vicki Veltri the Office of Healthcare Advocate has become a shining example of cost-effective, collaborative, public advocacy. The OHA is known by people in need of health care, health care providers, and advocates as fair and effective. **It is imperative that the OHA remain independent** and fully staffed.

An independent OHA is especially important as health care reform is implemented and navigating health insurance coverage becomes more and more complex. Further, since the OHA is not funded by state dollars, but rather by fees from insurance companies, the proposed

reduction to its budget will not help the state's financial difficulties – hence the OHA budget and staff should not be cut.

CONCLUSION

The Center for Medicare Advocacy supports the independence and budget of the Office of the Healthcare Advocate. We urge the legislature to do the same. Thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony. Please contact me if I can provide anything further.

Respectfully submitted,

Judith A. Stein

Judith A. Stein, Esq.
Executive Director
Center for Medicare Advocacy, Inc.

